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## A Way to Accomplish Interviews for Commanders and Staff

Steven Boylan

The path to successful interviews and media relations is an art, not science. It is a combination of building blocks based upon common sense, relationship building with the media (and individual reporters), practice, rehearsals and a degree of confidence and desire to engage.

There are a number of ways to conduct interviews. Nobody has the market cornered on good ideas and what works for one person will not work for another. The key is to be flexible, understand the environment in which you are about to enter and get experienced Public Affairs Officers in the mix early. Above all, common sense must prevail. The golden rule, *if you do not want to see it in print; do not say it*. I have told many over the years, if you are okay seeing what you said on the six o'clock news in your home town or on the front page of the paper for your family to see, then you are probably okay. That is not a guarantee, but for the most part you will be fine.

For the inexperienced individual being interviewed, always consider everything you say to be on-the-record. That is advice we as public affairs officers give to those we interact with, especially if we are not there to assist and if they have never talked with the reporter prior to the interview. That is the safest approach to take. In addition, *keep it simple, do not use jargon and stay in your lane* are all part of the mantra you hear.

Part of the problem I see in the latest major military-media relations event<sup>1</sup> is easy to see in the article; lack of a clear understanding of the rules of engagement or in worst case, a blatant disregard for those ground rules by reporter. I have seen statements of "off-the-record setting" coming out in follow-on articles. In my experience, there is no off-the-record unless everyone is in agreement beforehand or before any words are uttered. In those cases, you should not see the reporter with a tape recorder on or pad/pen in hand. As a PAO, never have I thought we were in an off-the-record setting due to a location or venue. We were either on-the-record, off-the-record or on background as we had agreed to prior to the start of any interview. Most of the time we had an understanding that all three could be used at anytime during the interview.

We teach/tell our senior leaders, staffs, officers, and troops that it is safest to act as if all is on-the-record. However, in practice we know there are the three areas, on-the-record, off-the-record, and background. It is up to the individual being interviewed to determine what level the

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<sup>1</sup> Publication of "The Runaway General" by Michael Hastings in *Rolling Stone* on June 22, 2010 and subsequent events.

interview is to be conducted, especially if no PAO is available to ensure everyone is clear on where they are in the discussion. If there is a PAO attending the interview, then he or she should be the honest broker.

I know many organizations have guidelines that stipulate all that is said in an interview is on-the-record. However, I have found those ground rules a bit unrealistic and limit the conversation, context and characterization reporters need to write the story. This not something for the novice to try to do first time out and not with a reporter you have no relationship with or experience.

From my own experiences, I have had commanders and other senior leaders who could use the three areas in the same paragraph effortlessly while others needed to ensure everyone knew where we were in the discussion. I also highly encouraged senior leaders who did not have a PAO around to record their conversations or have someone else in the room take notes in case they might be needed later. I have recorded 99% of all interviews I have either monitored or been involved in as a precaution for just the reasons brought out by the *Rolling Stone* article – an article that had enormous impact on a military wartime command and national military command and control - and has the potential to impact military-media relations. Will recording the interview prevent a reporter from breaking the rules if he or she so desires? No, but it puts them on notice that you have a clear record of what was said, how it was said and the level of attribution for the interview and future article. Should a reporter deviate from the agreed upon ground rules, it will kill their reputation completely if it can be shown they violated the agreement and kill any future access not only to the military, but other professions as well.

*Recent events should not be used to chill the relationships we have and will have with the media.* Leaders at all levels have an obligation to tell the public what is happening with their sons, daughters, husbands, and wives. The recent article should not be used to make the argument that the media cannot be trusted or used to avoid needed engagements from occurring.

There are those that will use the *Rolling Stone* article to avoid doing interviews. That is unfortunate. Others understand what we have to do and will use the article for lessons learned and make themselves better and more prepared to talk with the media. Those two groups are already set. The group I am most concerned with is the group on the fence. These individuals can fall to either side and can either engage with the media or withdraw. *It is our responsibility as leaders, mentors, educators and professionals to ensure that they fall on the side of the fence that helps them understand the issues, learn how to engage properly with minimal risk, and to ensure they are set up for success.* Only that way will we truly get beyond the perception the media is out to get the military.

*Colonel Steven Boylan, who will be retiring this fall is currently an Assistant Professor in the Command & General Staff College, Department of Command & Leadership. He has more than 15 years of public affairs experience at two - four star commands in the Army and Combined and Joint assignments. He has been the principal PAO for senior leaders since 1999 to include General David Petraeus for approximately three years. His last public affairs assignment was as the Battle Command Training Program senior public affairs observer/trainer and PAO.*

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